STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
The Annals of Iowa

Volume 63 | Number 3 (Summer 2004) pps. 330-332

The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism

ISSN 0003-4827

excelled in school, and played saxophone in dance bands. In his mid-teens, he took off for California on his own but returned home later. Never far away in the narrative is the author's awareness that he is indeed a "dirtfarmer's son."

The book occasionally steps back from autobiography to provide background in the history of northwest Iowa and Sioux City in particular. The prohibition crusade of the late nineteenth century, Governor William Harding's World War I–era "English only" proclamation (not a popular move among loyal Danes), and the Milk Strike and Farmer's Holiday movement of the early 1930s get attention. Although sometimes slightly inaccurate in historical detail, the book provides useful insight into the way events were remembered. The "dirtfarmer's son" can sympathize with the frustration of the farmers who threatened to hang the LeMars judge who presided at farm foreclosure hearings.

Andersen went on to earn a Ph.D. from Columbia University, to teach art and art history at several prestigious universities, and to design mosques in Saudi Arabia. Demonstrating this wisdom, Andersen sometimes inserts discussions of what was going on in the international art world simultaneous to the Iowa events he is describing. For example, the reader learns that Andersen's birth in 1928 coincided with Meyer Shapiro's first lecture on Impressionism at Columbia University and the death of Victorine Meurent in Paris, "the Olympia of Paris' 1863 Salon des Refusés that set the art world on end" (2). To my knowledge, no other Iowa history makes those particular connections. *The Dirtfarmer's Son* tells a unique story. Particularly in its farming and Danish Iowan perspective, it is an adolescent coming-of-age narrative that will have familiar overtones for many.

The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism, by Andrew C. Rieser. Religion and American Culture Series. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xiii, 399 pp. Maps, illustrations, diagrams, appendixes, notes, index. $37.50 cloth.

Reviewer Paisley Harris is assistant professor of history at the University of Wisconsin at Fond du Lac. Her dissertation (University of Minnesota, 2000) was "Taking the Stage: Traveling Shows, Traveling Performers, and Competing Narratives of Respectability in the Public Sphere, 1905–1930."

Andrew Rieser's *The Chautauqua Moment* is the first book-length scholarly study of the chautauqua and its impact on American society. Rieser conducted an impressive amount of archival research to write a study of national scope but with considerable richness and detail. His holistic approach—in which he examines not only institutional

structures, programming, and the overt beliefs of the founders and supporters of chautauqua, but also its spaces, symbols, and rituals—leads to a nuanced and fascinating interpretation. His book is particularly likely to interest students of Iowa and midwestern history given the tradition's long history in the state and region.

The chautauqua movement began in 1874 when Bishop John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller decided to begin a summer school for Sunday School teachers on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in New York. Soon, the school became a permanent institution of adult education, hosting speakers, forums, and programs. Over the next 30 years, chautauqua grew into a national movement. Hundreds of communities across the United States founded their own chautauqua assemblies while others hosted Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles, local "self-culture" clubs that followed a four-year reading program designed to emulate a four-year college degree. Circuit chautauquas, featuring a slate of speakers and performers offered to towns by business entrepreneurs, gradually came to predominate and outlasted the local assemblies and circles, touring the country into the early 1930s.

In Rieser's hands, chautauqua serves as a window into middle America's negotiation of the transition to a modern, capitalist, largely secular society. Chautauqua was central to the formation and institutionalization of white, native-born, Protestant, rural identity. Chautauqua also played a role in the spread of Progressive thought among the white middle class, particularly in rural areas and the Midwest. Rieser laces these insights together, arguing that chautauqua was key to the acceptance by most of the white middle class of a "creed" of modern liberalism, that is, a belief that the excesses of modern capitalism needed to be tamed by the coercive authority of the state. Rieser uses the term *creed* intentionally to suggest that this belief system was a form of civic religion. He argues that the middle class's acceptance of "an enlarged presence of government and its subsidiaries to counterbalance the corporate manipulation of private desire" grew out of a moralistic Victorian mindset (8). Chautauquans did not make a sharp shift towards a modern secular and consumerist mindset, but instead reconciled their religiosity with new realities. In fact, Rieser argues that this continued religiosity actually helped to define the middle class.

Rieser also analyzes chautauqua in terms of race and gender, usefully exploring both its implicit whiteness and its nature as female space. These chapters offer some of the most fascinating insights in the book. He critiques chautauqua's failure to adequately confront or even acknowledge racism and its blindness to its own "whiteness." He also examines the central role of women in chautauqua and its nature as

female space. His critical analysis demonstrates that chautauqua played a role in placing white privilege, white middle-class womanhood, and white middle-class women's sexual respectability firmly at the center of middle-class identity.

Rieser sees the development of the circuits as "the beginning of the end" of chautauqua: the circuits undermined local control and moved the programming more toward commercial entertainment and away from genuine democratic education and debate. "Beginning in 1904," Rieser argues, "the assemblies faced a new and (for most) insurmountable foe: the so-called *circuit Chautauqua* commercial tent shows that had appropriated the Chautauqua name and concept" (241–42, emphasis in original). He later acknowledges that the differences between circuit chautauqua and the assemblies are a matter of degree; the circuits "perpetuated trends under way in the assemblies" (270). Still, on the whole, Rieser adopts a declension narrative.

Many circuit chautauqua patrons whose first or only experience of the chautauqua tradition was through a circuit show, as well as researchers and historians who were first introduced to chautauqua through the papers of the Redpath Chautauqua Circuit, might take issue with this aspect of Rieser's analysis. But even circuit chautauqua "fans" will find some merit here, and troupers from midwestern "tent rep" troupes and medicine shows, and even some circuit chautauqua performers, would readily agree with his conclusion that chautauqua's programming eventually was little different from that of other commercial tent shows. As Rieser freely admits, the circuit chautauqua merits more study on its own terms. (The Redpath Collection is housed in the University of Iowa's Special Collections. The Theatre Museum of Repertoire Americana in Mount Pleasant, Iowa, houses the Caroline Schaffner Archive, the only archive on tent rep theater and traveling shows in the United States.)

As the first serious critical analysis of this influential social movement, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the process of the creation of white, middle-class identity and the assertion of hegemony by that class. One might wish at times for even more explicit criticism of Chautauqua's advancement of middle-class interests. But in the end his study is more useful for the way it illuminates how such a pursuit could coexist with a significant degree of, as he puts it, "sympathy for the victims of capitalism" (7). Such a sympathetic attitude may not be sufficient, in and of itself, to create an egalitarian society, as Rieser's study amply demonstrates, but in a time when such sympathy sometimes seems to be lacking altogether, it is important to consider how it did lead to genuine, long-lasting reform.